DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 163 613 EA 011 092

AUTHOR Duhamel, Ronald J.; Duhamel, Carolyn S.
TITLE Standards in Education: An Up-Date.
PUB DATE Jun 78
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Canadian School Trustees' Association Congress on Education (1st, Toronto, Ontario, June 17-21, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Achievement; *Academic Standards; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries
IDENTIFIERS Ontario

ABSTRACT

Standards in education have generated a great deal of dialogue. Many people who debate the question of standards in schools do not understand the term well; they do not know precisely what it is that has supposedly fallen or risen. In Ontario, even though there is not a great deal of evidence to indicate whether standards are rising or falling, and even though one must look carefully at the research which has been conducted in this field, there is some proof available which suggests that standards in elementary and secondary schools are as high, and probably higher, in a number of disciplines, than they have been in the past, in spite of the fact that there are a couple of problem areas. (Author)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED163613

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

STANDARDS IN EDUCATION: AN UP-DATE

A paper presented by

Ronald J. Duhamel, Ph.D.
Carolyn S. Duhamel, B.Sc.

at the First Congress on Education
sponsored by Canadian School Trustees' Association

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

R.J. Duhamel

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

EA 011 092

Toronto, Canada

June, 1978

STANDARDS IN EDUCATION: AN UP-DATE

Ronald J. Duhamel, Ph.D.
Carolyn S. Duhamel, B.Sc.

Ottawa, Canada

June, 1978

STANDARDS IN EDUCATION: AN UP-DATE

In the seventies, public education has come under severe and frequent attack by both individuals and groups with regard to the question of "standards". Everyone even remotely interested in standards in schools recognizes that the media often devote considerable time to the discussion. Anyone who has considered this issue notes quickly that it is often poorly defined, misunderstood and oversimplified.

According to a number of sources which include people from several walks of life, standards have declined alarmingly in the wake of progressive education usually associated with "Living and Learning - The Report of the Provincial Committee on Aims and Objectives of Education in the Schools of Ontario", better known as the "Hall/Denis Report". In the view of others, standards no longer exist in any meaningful form in the nation's schools. From such widespread dissatisfaction has emerged the "back-to-basics" movement, characterized by heavy emphasis on written language and mathematics skills, often to the almost total exclusion of many other learning activities which presently comprise school curricula. The educational system has begun to respond to this cry for change, to this return to the three R's; the re-introduction of certain compulsory courses in Ontario high school programs is but one manifestation of this response. Some individuals regard this latter occurrence as an admission of guilt or failure on the part of the system. Such conclusions, however, appear to be unwarranted in light of the data currently available on the topic of standards in the schools.

In presenting such data, the authors caution, however, that there are several factors and conditions which may limit the generalizability and the strength of the conclusions in any one study. Most critical among these is the nature of the data themselves. While the standards issue has been around and discussed for many years, discussion regarding this concern has only come into sharp focus over the past decade. Unfortunately, at least in Ontario, there exist few easily accessible longitudinal studies of significance on this topic. Furthermore, lack of consistency on key design features such as sample population, sampling techniques, testing instruments and procedures, and data analysis tends to hinder comparison among individual studies.

Changes in society over recent decades and the impact of these changes on schools and educational systems introduce still greater complexity to the discussion of standards in the schools. First, enrolments at all levels of educational endeavour have risen almost steadily since the Second World War and only recently has there been evidence of a levelling off and increasingly a decline. The effect of these spiralling enrolment figures was to introduce into the schools a large proportion of students whose ability levels would have precluded their admittance to several schools where their presence would have been somewhat difficult, perhaps even impossible, a decade or two ago. Schools no longer house only the so-called "cream of the crop", but rather must administer to huge numbers of individuals whose

academic potentials range from one extreme to another along a broad continuum of scholastic aptitudes and abilities. Increasingly, too, public educational institutions must seek to respond effectively and with increasing effectiveness to individuals whose learning abilities may be hindered by a variety of physical, emotional, psychological, and social impediments and/or disorders.

In addition, societal values and mores over the past twenty to thirty years have become increasingly permissive, liberal and relaxed; this situation, in combination with the disintegration of the extended family, the growing numbers of working mothers and single parent families and the gradually waning influence of the church and other community-oriented organizations, has shifted much of the emphasis and responsibility for the education and socialization of our youth from home and church to public and private educational institutions. Over many years, the function of schools has expanded steadily to the point where it would appear society expects, in effect, that the school be "all things to all people", and that educators instill in the youth of today a sense of discipline, responsibility, and obligation which are so often lacking in society at large. Given this entire set of circumstances, it behooves each individual to examine thoroughly and objectively current data relating to the question of standards in the schools.

The Case for Elementary Schools

As reported in Duhamel, Duhamel, and George (1977), the results of individual studies in both mathematics and,to a more limited extent, in reading at the elementary school level suggest that today's pupils on the whole perform as well or better than their counterparts of a decade and two decades previous. Furthermore, in the area of mathematics, it was reported that both subject matter and teaching methodology have changed very minimally over the past ten to twenty years, even in spite of new programs and teaching techniques which have emerged during this same time period (Russell and Robertson, 1975).

More recently, a province-wide evaluation of grade 7 and 8 students in selected curriculum areas reveals that,while there appear to be some very specific points of weakness with regard to student abilities as, for example, in the case of computational skills among grade 8 students, there is, at the same time good reason for optimism. In mathematics in the 1976-1977 school year, 65 per cent of the testees were rated competent or better. In science, while no great strengths emerged, nonetheless, some 79 per cent of the pupils tested achieved the level of competence demonstrating in general an adequate knowledge of basic scientific facts in both biology and physics. Furthermore, there was evidence that, on the whole, pupil attitudes are largely favorable toward the schools. Finally, contrary to popular belief, students can, in fact, communicate intelligibly in written English, with only 3%

of the testees failing to reach competency level. Of note too, is the large proportion of students, some 60 per cent, whose level of performance in this area was rated at the honours or high honours levels. These figures suggest a very definite growth in writing skills at the particular grade levels tested.

Yet another investigation, this one of a longitudinal nature,examined student achievement in language arts and mathematics in grades 5 to 8 in one school system over a forty-year span (Hedges, 1977). Unique in that it draws upon an extensive data bank based on identical or highly similar tests employed over a lengthy time period, this study. in addition to yielding valuable information and insights on a host of issues relating to student achievement in schools, suggests several major conclusions. First, grade 8 students perform consistently worse than their earlier counterparts in arithmetic computation and reasoning; in contrast, today's children in grades 5 to 7 outperform their earlier counterparts in fundamental mathematical operations. Second, reading comprehension scores reveal a small but steady improvement among grade 6 students over the past forty years, while grade 8 students achieve about as well or marginally better than did students in earlier testing phases preceding the investigation. Finally, vocabulary skills and knowledge at all grade levels tested are sharply improved over those of earlier generations of comparable students.

The Case for Secondary Schools

Much of the criticism directed at Ontario secondary schools over recent years, has come about in the wake of changes in school

organization as outlined in Circular H.S. 1 (1972-73). Research by the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) on the implementation of this individualized system and the repercussions of this major change has yielded five separate reports which taken together constitute the H.S. 1 studies. Some of the major findings which emerged from this series of investigations include the following items.

First, while the philosophy underlying the individualized system was favoured by educators and parents alike, only minimal organizational changes had occurred at the time the H.S. 1 studies were undertaken. Second, in spite of the initial "no compulsory subjects" feature of the credit system, data on the courses and patterns of student choice revealed that "traditional" subject areas remained popular among students and, with minor variations, enrolment rates in such courses remained relatively stable in comparison to those of the earlier traditional systems. In the third place, secondary school students on the whole tended to favour average and high difficulty level courses with few individuals opting for low or open levels of course difficulty. Fourth, prior to the present core curriculum provisions, many schools endorsed a core of subjects and stipulated prerequisites which, in effect, limited student choice with regard to course selection. Fifth, student influence was restricted largely to matters of course selection and dress. In all other matters of an organizational or educational nature, student influence was felt to be minimal. Sixth, most students and teachers reported satisfaction

with the changes in school climate and student social patterns which emerged within the individualized system. There was a general consensus that the organizational changes occurring with the implementation of the credit system created an atmosphere more conducive to both meaningful teaching and learning. Finally, in the seventh place, no conclusive data were found with regard to student achievement in the traditional system as compared to that in the credit system. It seemed highly possible that such organizational change per se may not directly influence learning; rather, improvements or declines in student achievement were perhaps more directly the result of intervening variables occasioned by initial modifications in organizational structure.

More recently, the Ontario Interface Project sponsored by the Ministries of Education and of Colleges and Universities again while pointing to some isolated areas of weakness, for example, lowered test scores in grade 13 physics in 1976 as compared to those in 1970, is on the whole favourable toward the schools and suggests that wide-spread deterioration in student performance is, for the greatest part, more fiction than fact. The data indicate further that raw school marks for grade 13 today are as accurate predictors of university performance as were standardized province-wide examinations in the period preceding their abolition in 1967. In his discussion of the Interfacedata, Russell (1977) suggests that the decline in both aptitude and achievement test scores of students at the secondary and post-secondary levels in recent years is more accurately attributable to grossly increased enrolments than to any clearly documented decline in standards and

student performance; this same point has been elaborated on earlier in this discussion.

Conclusion

While the data on standards in the schools remain incomplete and while it is unlikely that the dilemma of standards can ever be thoroughly resolved, nonetheless, it is perhaps time that educators and society at large take some affirmative actior on the basis of the evidence available to date.

First, it is crucially important to realize that whenever any debate concerning standards takes place, a number of definitions can be and often are used. Such a practice leads to frustration, confusion, and obviously, disagreement. What is it, that is, which type of standard(s) is/are of most importance to people who are involved in education, be they parents, students, or educators? It has been suggested that the only real standard is a comparison between what a student achieves at a particular task and the level of achievement of which he/she is actually capable. Others have stated that society must know if a child of "x" ability performs as well, in various disciplines, as a pupil of similar ability a decade or more ago. Is this the information which is required? Are there more data needed? What are they? Second, it is imperative that more thorough study be undertaken to yield a more complete assessment of student achievement in all areas of school curricula. Third, the educational community must strive to maintain continued high levels of performance where

they already exist, while at the same time undertaking corrective measures to overcome certain weaknesses identified by current and future research data. Finally, it is necessary that educational institutions and systems look to the future to examine and select educational objectives and practices which will ensure an increasing quality of performance from the learner for whatever educational tasks he/she pursues. In so doing, and in order to maximize this possibility, one should seek to build in those positive attributes in evidence in present educational structures.

REFERENCES

Alexander, William E. and Joseph P. Farrell, Student Participation in Decision-Making, H.S. 1 Studies, Toronto, OISE, 1974.

Association of Canadian University Teachers of English Report, F.E.L. Priestly and H.I. Kerpneck, 1977.

Duhamel, Ronald J., Carolyn Duhamel and Gerald George, Standards in Education: What Are the Issues? OCLEA, Ontario Council for Leadership in Educational Administration, Vol. 10, June, 1977.

Fleming, W.G., The Individualized System: Findings from Five Studies, H.S. 1 Studies, Toronto, OISE, 1974.

Hastings, D., "A Study to Determine the Reading Comprehension of Grade Six Pupils 1971-72 Comparable to Grade Six Pupils 1933-38, 1952-54 in the Elementary Schools of St. Catharines", Master's Thesis, Niagara University, 1972.

Hedges, H.G., Achievement in Basic Skills, Ontario Ministry of Education, Toronto, 1977.

Holmes, Mark, The Intermediate Evaluation Project, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Toronto, 1977.

Laxer, Gordon, Ross E. Traub and Katherine Wayne, The Individualized System: Student Social and Achievement Patterns, H.S. 1 Studies, Toronto, OISE, 1974.

Leithwood, K.A., J.S. Clipsham and C. Davies, The Individualized System: Courses and Patterns of Student Choice, H.S. 1 Studies, Toronto, OISE, 1974.

Ontario School Trustee's Council News Bulletin, 1977.

Quality of Education in Ontario: A Survey of the Parents Perspective; Environics Research Group, 1972.

Russell, H. Howard, Ontario Interface Project: Results Favour Schools, Reporting Classroom Research, Ontario Educational Research Council, Vol. 6, No. 3, September-October, 1977.

Russell, H., Floyd Robertson, A Study of the Characteristics of Current Elementary School Mathematics Program in Ontario, Toronto, Ministry of Education, Ontario, 1975.

Ryan, Doris W., The Individualized System: Administration and Leadership, H.S. 1 Studies, Toronto, OISE, 1974.

Secondary - Postsecondary Interface Study, Ministry of Education and Ministry of Colleges and Universities, 1977.